

# MESSAGE FROM THE CO-CHAIRS

Dr. Annie Norman, State Librarian,  
Delaware Division of Libraries

Cindy Shermeyer, Executive Director,  
Literacy Delaware

As we embark on a new year, it is the perfect time to reflect on the milestones of 2023.



Three years ago, our collective journey began with a shared vision: ensuring that every Delawarean, across the lifespan, possesses the literacy skills necessary to thrive. The inception of the Delaware Literacy Alliance marked the beginning of a transformative movement. In 2023, the Alliance and its partners witnessed significant developments. The year commenced with Literacy Delaware commemorating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in January. April and May saw the screening of the documentary *"The Truth About Reading: The Invisible Crisis Hiding in Plain Sight"* across six venues. May saw the very first statewide literacy strategic planning convening, resulting in the publication of the first-ever statewide literacy plan.

The Delaware Readiness Teams traveled around the state, distributing books, resources, and information about kindergarten readiness and registration. Adult Education and Family Literacy Week was celebrated throughout the state with proclamations and program activities. September was also proclaimed Literacy Month in Delaware as Governor Carney was joined at the Wilmington Library by Sec. of Education Holodick, Dr. Norman, Wilmington Library Director Jamar Rahming, legislators, other Alliance partners, and literacy professionals for the signing of the state proclamation. The Health Literacy subcommittee had a full agenda during Health Literacy Month in October with a statewide gathering. Governor Carney signed a second proclamation, this time proclaiming October as Health Literacy Month.

*The forecast for 2024 is for a blizzard of activity. An important objective for 2024 is to position the Science of Reading*

*at the forefront of reading instruction across all levels in Delaware. Only through a real understanding of this approach can we foster a productive dialogue on changing the trajectory of low literacy rates. We echo the sentiments of Barbara Bush, believing that the state's literacy crisis is solvable with commitment, determination, and the necessary financial support. With everything at stake—can we afford not to solve it?*



As we move forward into 2024, our overarching goal is to focus on and operationalize the objectives outlined in the statewide strategic plan. Elevating literacy as a key driver for equity will be at the forefront of our efforts, with plans to launch a statewide culturally sensitive awareness campaign, work on aligning literacy services among partners establish a robust web presence, and implement a universal communication strategy. This initiative includes an online platform and statewide campaign to create awareness, disseminate information, and provide education to elevate literacy across the lifespan as a foundational element for equity.

**Thank you** for your unwavering commitment and support as we strive to make literacy accessible to all.

# DELAWARE AND THE SCIENCE OF READING

Kathleen Seeman, Reading Specialist and *and DE COE Board Member*



*"We need to stop saying only 30% of our kids are reading proficiently. We need to be saying 70% of our kids are not. Our hair should be on fire."*

—Zaretta Hammond, a global educational expert

The good news for Delaware and the nation is that the fire engines are en route. We can hear the sirens in the distance, and thanks to a variety of measures to turn the tide, including legislative actions, help is on the way. However, it will take all hands on deck across various Delaware sectors to address, distinguish, and ultimately rebuild, given that this fire has been blazing for years.

The effects of this blaze have permeated all aspects of Delaware life, where low literacy is the direct cause of almost all the major social issues, including economic disparity, food and housing insecurity, addiction, crime, incarceration, low employment rates, poor healthcare, life expectancy, mental health issues, and violence. Our low literacy levels impact all socio-economic levels, races, ethnicities, genders, and geographical locations within Delaware. It is safe to say that every family in our state knows a child or adult struggling to read. In fact, 70% of our elementary students and 20% of adults face this struggle.

*America's Health Rankings* found that 25.3% of Delaware's fourth-grade public school students scored proficient or above in reading comprehension on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This 2023 data ranks Delaware as 46/50 states in fourth-grade reading proficiency. [\*America's Health Rankings Fourth Grade Reading Proficiency in Delaware\*](#)

How did low literacy rates become the norm here and nationally? The quick answer is that we do not have an illiteracy crisis in the U.S.; instead, we have an instructional crisis. Boon Philanthropy, a nonprofit dedicated to ending the reading crisis in America, believes,

***"The root cause of the reading crisis is simple: there is a shortage of teachers who understand how to use structured language, the reading instruction methods scientifically proven to work with all learners."***

This instructional crisis for many can be traced as far back as the mid-1800s. Horace Mann disagreed with the prolific use of phonics-based literacy instruction (a bottom-up approach of letters and sounds before words). Mann promoted a new "whole language" approach (memorizing whole words), which permeated educational systems so thoroughly that by the 1950s, most American schoolchildren were no longer sounding out words letter by letter. Unfortunately, this new approach did not produce great results. National graduation rates hovered slightly over 50%, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Academics began to notice the "whole language approach" produced inferior results when compared to phonics-based instruction. In 2000, the National Reading Panel confirmed that for children to

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become successful readers, they need explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This research indicated that properly trained teachers can teach 95% of all children to read if they have been taught to teach reading explicitly and effectively.

This body of scientific research, focused on effective and researched teaching practices, has become known as the science of reading or SOR. Time and time again, SOR demonstrates that learning to read is a complex process that demands integrating many skills that do not develop naturally. The brain is hardwired to speak, not to learn to read. Thus, the process is more straightforward for some than others. Research confirms that 70% of all students need direct, systematic reading instruction to become proficient readers.

For Delaware, the success of other states like Mississippi and Tennessee in using the Science of Reading to increase their literacy levels spurred legislation to achieve similar results within our state. An effort led by Senators Laura Sturgeon, Sarah McBride, and Representative Kim Williams worked across party lines to pass three key pieces of literacy legislation based on the science of reading.

The Delaware Department of Education reported, "In the spring of 2022, members of the House and Senate put forth legislation to solidify the strategic intentions of the state's literacy plan into law. The following bills were signed into law in August 2022 and are the most comprehensive package of bills to govern curriculum use and professional learning in Delaware to date." [Link to Delaware Delivers Strong Early Readers](#)



The bills provide the following:

1. Senate Bill 4: High-quality curricula and professional learning
2. House Bill 304: Screening and interventions
3. Senate Bill 133: Educator preparation

These legislative bills represent a solid initial step in addressing the state's literacy rates. However, to completely extinguish the fire, additional measures must be implemented. Early identification of reading disabilities as early as age two is crucial. Training our state's healthcare providers to recognize the early signs of reading failure and guide families toward preventative interventions can proactively prevent learning gaps. Other essential measures involve educating the public on understanding the science of reading and what effective reading instructional practices entail.

Equipping parents with pertinent questions for their child's reading journey during parent/teacher conferences is vital. Mental healthcare workers, clergy, and youth workers stand to benefit from recognizing that a lack of reading skills serves as the gateway to mental health issues, including addiction, violence, crime, gun use, and often suicide. Understanding the role that generational illiteracy plays in relationships, personal narratives, and interactions with schools and teachers creates opportunities to heal generational wounds. The judicial branch should mandate learning to read for all convicted offenders, considering the average reading level in our prison population is at grade four. The school-to-prison pipeline has resulted from instructional failures that perpetuated generations of illiteracy. In meetings between grant seekers and grantors to discuss projects within the state, acknowledging the significant role lack of reading skills plays in prevailing social issues and directing time, talent, and resources toward projects enhancing literacy to mitigate broader societal challenges is imperative.

***Dr. Kymyona Burke, a national literacy expert, says it best, "Illiteracy is one of the most solvable issues of our time." Let's do this for Delaware's kids! All hands on deck.***



# WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE SCIENCE OF READING?

Nicola Wedderburn, Executive Director, International Literacy Association and DE COE Board Member



*The International Literacy Association defines the science of reading as “a convergence of accumulated and evolving findings from research regarding reading processes and reading instruction (pedagogy) and how the two are implemented across contexts that interactively bridge cultural, social, biological, psychological, linguistic, and historical bases of learning.”*

***The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a professional membership organization of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 128 countries. Through our work, we support literacy professionals and educators from every corner of the world.***

In the broadest sense, the science of reading (SOR) refers to a corpus of peer-reviewed research on how we learn to read and develop as readers. However, much of the mainstream media coverage of the topic has perpetuated a misconception that SOR is a set approach to teaching reading with a singular focus on explicit, systematic phonics.

Fortunately, as awareness and understanding of SOR has grown and deepened, so has the discussion surrounding it. In 2024, you can expect those conversations to evolve and expand beyond reading in the K–3 classroom.

## **The Science of Writing**

Research has long demonstrated the link between writing and reading acquisition, but too often, they are treated as discrete areas with separate instructional blocks. Look for professional learning on integrating the two and how SOR-aligned writing instruction can lead to improved student outcomes.

## **The Science of Adolescent Reading**

SOR work doesn't end in grade 3. Evidence-based interventions for older struggling readers have been proven to help adolescent learners reach grade level faster and more effectively. This is critical for ensuring those students have the greatest chance for academic success beyond the ELA block.

## **Harnessing AI to Enhance SOR-Aligned Literacy Instruction**

Advances in natural language AI chatbots have experts predicting rapid gains in automated reading tutoring and writing feedback. Integrating AI tools and teaching related critical thinking skills offer unique ways to personalize instruction and support literacy development.

These are just a few of the SOR trends to watch for in 2024. To stay apprised of the latest on SOR and other important literacy topics, including dyslexia, early literacy, multilingual learners, and more, please visit [literacyworldwide.org](https://literacyworldwide.org).

# DELAWARE WORKING TO DELIVER LITERACY OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Kathy Kelly, Director: Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development; Delaware Department of Education  
and new and DE COE Board Member

Ensuring literacy outcomes for all Delaware students is critical for their future success in college, careers, and life. In 2019, the Department of Education collaborated with stakeholders across the PK to postsecondary spectrum to establish an early literacy framework, focusing on four strategic intents within the PK-12 system.

***The Delaware PK-3 Literacy Plan Framework is designed to provide guidance, enhance professional learning, and develop tools to eliminate achievement gaps and improve learning across the curriculum.***

Aligned with the science of reading, the plan revolves around standards-aligned core instruction, high-quality instructional materials, enhanced early literacy instruction, and educator support through Institutes of Higher Education.

The theory of action posits that equipping educators with high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials and professional learning grounded in the science of reading leads to better instructional decisions, feedback, and support. Delaware Delivers—Early Reading Excellence involves key levers such as high-quality instructional materials, professional learning, a Multi-Tiered System of Support Framework (MTSS), and support for Institutes of Higher Education.

Since the launch of the Delaware Early Literacy Plan, three bills have been signed into law, reinforcing early literacy work and supporting local



Read the  
full article  
here. >

school systems. The state has introduced a new early literacy website aligned with the Pre-K-3 Literacy Plan and legislation. Support initiatives include digital resources, reimagining professional learning grants, AIM Pathways for Delaware Educators, early literacy micro-credentials, and the Early Literacy Leadership Academy.

Collaborative efforts with national experts, the University of Delaware, and SchoolKit contribute to professional learning opportunities for educators. The Delaware Literacy Coalition and the Department collaborate to enhance literacy practices, offering strategic plans for Grades 4-8 and supporting instructional coaches within the Literacy Cadre. Professional learning opportunities extend to middle and high school educators through the University of Delaware's School Success Center and SchoolKit's Secondary Literacy Acceleration Academy.

The Department has developed guides for school system leaders and families to aid educators further, addressing early literacy investments, legislation, and at-home support. Additionally, the Department guides navigating early literacy legislation concerning the science of reading and high-quality instructional materials for Multilingual Learners.

# DELAWARE WORKING TO DELIVER LITERACY OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Kathy Kelly, Director: Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development; Delaware Department of Education

## *Reading is so essential to our daily lives that we often forget its amazing power!*

From the time we wake up to the time we sleep, we read a lot! Some researchers estimate that we read several thousand words each day. Whether we're checking the measuring spoon required for the coffee maker or perusing the menu at WAWA, we engage in reading from the start of our morning coffee routine. We are reading when we look at the bus schedule or the construction road signs. Determining the nutritional value of foods when shopping requires reading. Completing job applications, receiving emails, following directions, performing work tasks, understanding our kids' report cards, scanning medicine bottle labels, and passing driver's license exams or citizenship tests all require reading. Not forgetting, scanning TV program schedules, studying directions to how to play software games, fixing laptops, and downloading new apps on your cell phone all rely on an ability to read. As a bonus, reading strengthens speaking and writing skills!

If there was ever a SUPERPOWER, it is the ability to read.



The ability to read affects our daily routines, jobs, health, community involvement, engagement with government, and our children's success in school.

### Consider this:

The National Center on Educational Statistics estimates, based on PIAAC results—an international assessment of adults that scored reading ability on a scale of 1 to 5 (highest ability)—that:

**21%** of Americans have difficulty comparing/contrasting information, paraphrasing, and making inferences. This translates into one in five adults having trouble gaining information from medical, educational, employment, legal, and political information. (IES/NCES [PIAAC - U.S. State and County Estimates Resources \(ed.gov\)](#))



Adults scoring at the lowest literacy scores were more likely to report a poor health status and more limited civic engagement (Rampey et al., 2016)

**20%** of Delawareans, ages 16–74, read at Level 1, which includes recognizing basic vocabulary, determining sentence meaning, and the ability to read paragraphs of text. (IES/NCES [PIAAC Skills Map \(ed.gov\)](#))



**35%** of Delawareans, ages 16–74, read at Level 2, which includes paraphrasing and making inferences. (IES/NCES [PIAAC Skills Map \(ed.gov\)](#))



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In September 2020, Forbes ran an article entitled “Low Literacy Levels among U.S. Adults Could be Costing the Economy \$2.2 Trillion a Year”. [Low Literacy Levels Among U.S. Adults Could Be Costing the Economy \\$2.2 Trillion A Year \(forbes.com\)](#) The author determined from further analysis of PIACC/US data that:

The average income of adults at

Level 3 = nearly \$63,000

Level 2 = approximately \$48,000

Level 1 & below = roughly \$34,000

If all U.S. adults could perform at a Level 3 rating, an additional \$2.2 trillion in annual income or 10% of the gross domestic product could result.

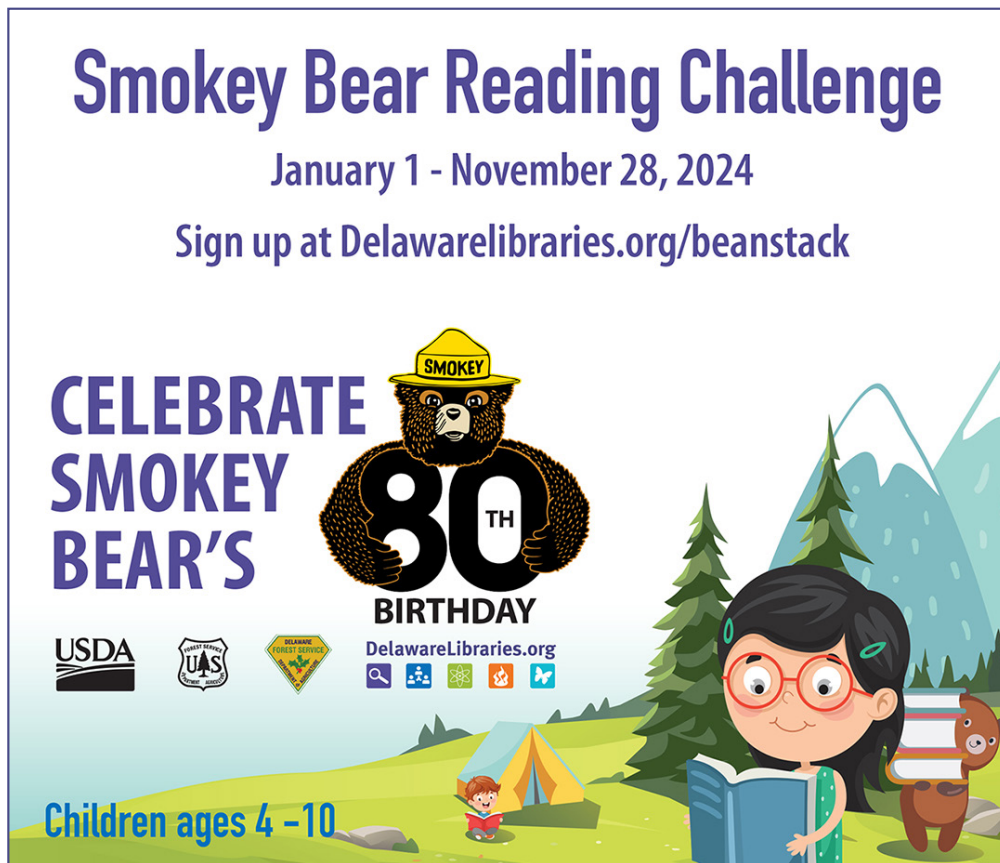
The ability to read is an investment that benefits the individual, the family, the community, and the state. For adults in Delaware who want to improve their reading skills, the Department of Education funds free Adult Basic Education classes throughout the state. Last year, 2,893 adult learners invested their time and effort in increasing their reading

and math skills to gain employment, be eligible for promotions, help their school-age children, enter training programs, register for college, learn English, and become role models for family members. While in class, these adults also learned digital and financial literacy skills, completed career plans, increased their civics knowledge, and completed workforce preparation skills. Delaware Adult Education has recently experienced a dramatic increase in serving English language learners. Fifty percent of all Adult Basic Education learners enrolled to increase their English Language proficiency. Delaware adult learners invested 244,847 hours of their precious time in increasing their reading, writing, and math skills to benefit their families, communities, workplaces, and the state and expand their opportunities.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates that by 2027, 70% of jobs that provide a living wage will require education or training beyond high school. [Raise the Bar: Postsecondary and Career Pathways | U.S. Department of Education](#) Clearly, the ability to read impacts all Delawareans’ present and future.

# COMMITTEE UPDATES

From January 1 through November 28, 2024, the United States Forest Service and state library systems across the country are celebrating Smokey's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday by participating in the Smokey Bear Reading Challenge. The challenge is geared towards children ages 4 through 10, but all ages are welcome to join. The Smokey Bear Reading Challenge aims to engage youth in reading about wildfire prevention, forests, and natural resource careers while they explore their local environment. The challenge is designed to complement the 2024 National Summer Library Reading Program theme of "Adventure Begins at Your Library!" which will run from June through August. [Read the full media release here.](#)



## HEALTH LITERACY

### 2023 Achievements

Established a robust council with 43 members, including 16 Advisory Board Council Members and 10-12 members per subcommittee.

- Successfully obtained the governor's proclamation recognizing Health Literacy Month in October.
- Some members adopted the IHA (Institute for HealthCare Advancement) Certificate program.
- Received a grant award from Highmark.
- Curated a calendar for Health Literacy Month featuring all events and activities.
- Participated in various Health Literacy Month activities.

### 2024 Goals and Progress

- Launch a website for the council and public using Highmark funds.
- Develop recommendations for health professional education.
- Enhance statewide planning for Health Literacy Month.
- Secure another governor proclamation.
- Apply for additional grants to support initiatives – currently awaiting approval for state funds.
- Establish a comprehensive policy agenda.
- Pilot community engagement strategies to enhance outreach and impact.

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

### 2023 Achievements

- Participated in a statewide strategic planning session, contributing to the creation of statewide goals.
- Collaborated on curating a bookmark with a QR code linking to a website with additional resources for families and parents.
- Conducted a survey to understand partner services, goals, and objectives.
- Developed a comprehensive calendar of Early Child Literacy summer events in Delaware.
- Partnered in book distribution during the Summer Library Reading Program to efficiently provide books to children and families.

### 2024 Goals and Progress

- Identify needs and resources through partner survey results.
- Define early childhood priorities for advocacy efforts.
- Curate a One-pager tailored to Community Partners/Providers and Families.
- Build informational materials emphasizing the importance of early child brain development for future literacy achievement.
- Disseminate information on Early Literacy Skills and the Science of Reading.
- Building awareness through unified messaging, emphasizing general early literacy outreach, a focus on intergenerational literacy, and the Summer Literacy Outreach Project.



## ADULT LITERACY TASK FORCE

### 2023 Achievements

- Engaged in the statewide strategic planning session and contributed to the development of statewide goals.
- Statewide Proclamation: Governor Carney declared September as Literacy Month on Tuesday, September 19, 2023, at the Wilmington Library. Notable attendees included the first lady, Senator Sturgeon, and the Secretary of Education.
- Kent County Proclamation: Declared on September 12 in support of Literacy Month.
- Sussex County Proclamation: Declared on September 20 to recognize Literacy Month.
- Recognition of Adult Education and Family Literacy Week from September 18 to 22, 2023.
- Conducted two in-person referral mapping sessions to identify gaps and for effective planning and coordination.
- Adult Literacy Facts One-Pager curated for distribution at outreach events to raise awareness and provide information.

### 2024 Goals

- Decrease the waitlist for participants in adult education programs.
- Identify and address barriers and gaps in the referral system to assess the need for increased capacity.
- Enhance adult literacy awareness by actively participating in a statewide awareness campaign.
- Develop an advocacy plan that prioritizes adult literacy in the state, emphasizing the intergenerational approach.
- Establish opportunities for collaboration and alignment in literacy efforts across the lifespan throughout the state.

#### DelawareLibraries



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*Facilitated by PMG Consulting*